

Message Text

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R 300257Z SEP 76
FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY CAIRO

C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 242946

NOT RELEASABLE TO FOREIGN NATIONALS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1

TAGS: UR, LE, PFOR

SUBJECT: RECENT SOVIET INITIATIVES ON LEBANON

1. FOLLOWING IS TEXT OF INR REPORT NO. 601, "RECENT SOVIET INITIATIVES ON LEBANON," DATED SEPTEMBER 28, 1976.
2. ELIYAS SARKIS' INAUGURATION AS PRESIDENT OF LEBANON AND THE RECENT ROUND OF ARAB NEGOTIATIONS ON THE CRISIS THERE HAVE TRIGGERED A NEW BURST OF SOVIET DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITY. OVER THE LAST TWO WEEKS MOSCOW HAS:

(A)--ANNOUNCED A MORE EVENHANDED POLICY VIS-A-VIS THE SYRIAN-PALESTINIAN/LEFTIST CONFLICT (IN AN AUTHORITATIVE PRAVDA "OBSERVER" ARTICLE ON SEPTEMBER 8);

(B)--CONSULTED WITH PLO LEADERS QADDUMI (MOSCOW,
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SEPTEMBER 15-18) AND ARAFAT (BEIRUT, SEPTEMBER 18, 20,

AND 22); ARAFAT REPORTEDLY RECEIVED TWO MESSAGES FROM THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP DURING THOSE MEETINGS;

(C)--DESPATCHED ROVING AMBASSADOR AND GENEVA CONFERENCE REPRESENTATIVE VINOGRADOV TO DAMASCUS (SEPTEMBER 20); AND

(D)--PURSUED DIPLOMATIC CONTACTS WITH OTHER ARAB STATES INCLUDING EGYPT, IRAQ, AND KUWAIT.

3. THESE MANEUVERS MAY BE MOTIVATED PARTLY BY THE KREMLIN'S UNQUENCHABLE DESIRE TO BE PART OF WHATEVER ACTION THERE IS. THEY ALSO SEEM TO REFLECT AN ASSESSMENT THAT THE LEBANESE SITUATION HAS ENTERED A CRITICAL PHASE AND THAT SARKIS' ASSUMPTION OF POWER HOLDS SOME HOPE FOR MOVEMENT ON NEGOTIATIONS. THERE ARE ALSO INDICATIONS THAT THE SOVIETS BELIEVE THAT THE MILITARY SITUATION NOW FAVORS TALKS AND THAT--GIVEN PLO REVERSES ON THE BATTLEFIELD--CHANCES ARE POOR FOR THE EMERGENCE OF A SETTLEMENT MORE COMPATIBLE WITH MOSCOW'S BROADER INTERESTS IF THE FIGHTING CONTINUES. PRAVDA'S "OBSERVER" SPOKE, FOR EXAMPLE, OF "TELLING BLOWS" SUFFERED BY THE PLO. MOREOVER, IT CLAIMED THAT THE IMPERIALISTS AND ISRAEL WERE SEEKING TO ELIMINATE THE PALESTINIAN RESISTANCE MOVEMENT AS AN "INDEPENDENT FACTOR," A CHARGE SUGGESTING MOSCOW THINKS THAT SYRIA'S ADVANTAGE IS NOW IRREVERSIBLE AND THAT FURTHER HOSTILITIES ARE ONLY LIKELY TO RESULT IN A CRUSHING PALESTINIAN DEFEAT.

4. WHILE THE KREMLIN WOULD WELCOME A GENERAL LEBANESE SETTLEMENT, IT PROBABLY HAS NO ILLUSION THAT AN ACCORD IS POSSIBLE ANY TIME SOON. ITS MAIN OBJECTIVE IN ANY CASE SEEMS TO BE AN ARMISTICE BETWEEN THE PLO AND SYRIA TO PREVENT ESCALATION OF THE FIGHTING BETWEEN TWO ERSTWHILE SOVIET CLIENTS. THE CURRENT INITIATIVE WOULD APPEAR DESIGNED TO MOVE BOTH SIDES TOWARD COMPROMISE THROUGH A CAREFULLY BALANCED COMBINATION OF INDUCEMENTS AND PRESSURES.

5. IN SUPPORT OF ITS PALESTINIAN FRIENDS MOSCOW CONTINUES TO:

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(A)--AFFIRM IN THE STRONGEST TERMS ITS BACKING FOR THE PLO AS AN INDEPENDENT FACTOR IN THE MIDDLE EAST;

(B)--CRITICIZE SYRIA'S MILITARY OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE PLO; AND

(C)--INSIST THAT A LEBANESE SETTLEMENT MUST PROTECT

PALESTINIAN INTERESTS.

MOSCOW APPARENTLY STILL ENDORSES PROVISION OF SOVIET WEAPONS TO THE PLO BY OTHER ARABS, PARTICULARLY LIBYA, IRAQ, AND EGYPT.

6. HOWEVER, THE SOVIETS EVIDENTLY ARE ALSO PRESSING THE PALESTINIANS TO COMPROMISE WITH DAMASCUS. THEY HAVE PUBLICLY CALLED FOR PLO ACCOMMODATION WITH SYRIA AND CONDEMNED THOSE OPPOSED TO A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT, THUS BUTTRESSING ARAFAT AND HIS "MODERATE" FOLLOWERS AGAINST DIEHARD LEFTIST AND REJECTIONIST OPPONENTS. BUT THIS POSITION ALSO IMPLICITLY LINKS CONTINUATION OF SOVIET BACKING TO A MORE FLEXIBLE PLO ATTITUDE. IN ADDITION, THE COOL TONE OF PRESS REPORTS ON QADDUMI'S TALKS IN MOSCOW AND THE FLURRY OF RECENT CONTACTS WITH ARAFAT PROBABLY INDICATE THAT MOSCOW IS PRESSING ITS CASE FORCEFULLY. IN ANY EVENT, PLO REQUESTS FOR PUNITIVE ACTION AGAINST SYRIA AND FOR MORE DIRECT AND VISIBLE SOVIET BACKING APPARENTLY GO UNANSWERED.

7. ON THE SYRIAN SIDE, SOVIET EFFORTS TO MOUNT POLITICAL PRESSURE AGAINST ASAD ALSO CONTINUE:

(A)--ASAD ALLEGEDLY WAS WARNED REPEATEDLY, MOST RECENTLY IN A MESSAGE ON SEPTEMBER 15, AGAINST EFFORTS TO IMPOSE A SETTLEMENT IN LEBANON BY FORCE AND WAS GIVEN TO UNDERSTAND THAT CONTINUED SYRIAN OBSTINACY COULD DAMAGE SOVIET RELATIONS; WHILE

(B)--THE SOVIET MEDIA HAS MAINTAINED AN UNRELENTING CAMPAIGN AGAINST SYRIAN POLICY, DESCRIBING DAMASCUS' ARMED INTERVENTION AGAINST THE PLO AS SERVING ISRAELI, CONFIDENTIAL

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IMPERIALIST, AND REACTIONARY INTERESTS.

TASS' PUBLICATION LAST WEEK OF AN ALLEGED SYRIAN COMMUNIST PARTY ATTACK ON ASAD'S POLICY CONTAINED AN IMPLICIT REMINDER THAT MOSCOW COULD TURN TO SYRIA'S COMMUNISTS TO INCREASE ASAD'S DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES.

8. MOSCOW'S MAIN TACTIC FOR NUDGING ASAD APPEARS, HOWEVER, TO HINGE ON ADOPTION OF A MORE FLEXIBLE POSITION TOWARD A FUTURE SYRIAN ROLE IN LEBANON. PRAVDA'S "OBSERVER" NOTABLY MODIFIED MOSCOW'S EARLIER HARD-LINE DEMAND FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF SYRIAN FORCES. WHILE CRITICIZING THE INTERVENTION, THE "OBSERVER" REFRAINED FROM A DIRECT DEMAND FOR ITS CESSATION. MOREOVER, PRAVDA'S DEMAND THAT THE LEBANESE THEMSELVES BE LEFT TO SETTLE THE CRISIS

"WITHOUT OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE" AT LEAST NOMINALLY COULD BE CONSTRUED AS SOVIET BACKING FOR AN END TO PLO AS WELL AS SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE FIGHTING. IN ADDITION, SOVIET OFFICIALS HAVE AFFIRMED THAT THE USSR CONTINUES TO HONOR SOVIET-SYRIAN BILATERAL AGREEMENTS, INCLUDING PROVISION OF ECONOMIC AND MILITARY ASSISTANCE.

9. PROSPECTS:

10. SOVIET PROSPECTS FOR EXERCISING A DECISIVE VOICE IN LEBANESE DEVELOPMENTS ARE NOT BRIGHT DESPITE THE NEW CARROT-STICK INITIATIVES. MOSCOW'S POTENTIAL LEVERAGE OVER BOTH THE PLO AND SYRIA IS CONSIDERABLE BUT REMAINS LIMITED BY A NUMBER OF CONSIDERATIONS. ONE IS AN UNWILLINGNESS TO RISK DAMAGING TIES WITH EITHER SIDE BY ACTING DECISIVELY, E.G., SUSPENDING ECONOMIC AID TO SYRIA OR THE PLO. THE SOVIET POSITION AT PRESENT IS FURTHER COMPLICATED BY SYRIAN AND PALESTINIAN SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE LATEST DIPLOMATIC FLURRY; THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED MANY FALSE ALARMS OVER THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS. MOSCOW MAY BE HOPING TO CAPITALIZE ON US DISTRACTIONS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, BUT ITS EFFORT TO GAIN A VOICE IN LEBANON IS LIKELY TO HAVE LITTLE EFFECT ON NEGOTIATIONS AMONG THE LEBANESE AND OTHER ARAB PARTIES. NOR IS IT LIKELY TO IMPROVE CHANCES TO PROMOTE BROADER SOVIET INTERESTS IN THE AREA UNTIL THE ARABS THEMSELVES

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SORT OUT A SOLUTION TO THE LEBANESE WAR. ROBINSON

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